# The Handbook of
# Public Sector
# Communication

Edited by **Vilma Luoma-aho, María-José Canel**

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# The Handbook of Public Sector Communication

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María-José Canel

## WILEY Blackwell

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# Acknowledgment

# Introduction to Public Sector Communication

## Vilma Luoma-aho and María-José Canel

Public sector organizations exist to make society function effectively. These organizations govern, serve citizens, and run the public sector and its services according to principles set by the government. In their communication, public sector organizations must balance the democratic communication aims of *engaging citizens* with organizational and institutional goals, as well as with survival in the midst of budget restrictions. The ultimate goal of public sector communication is to enable citizen welfare, but how this can be achieved in practice is both academically and professionally debated. In fact, public sector organizations' communication reflects the cultural and historical heritage of the society around them, and as such there is no one universal model of "good public sector communication." Models and practices that are effective in one societal setting may actually be detrimental in another.

Despite this diversity, there appear to be similar challenges emerging for public sector organizations globally, and there is thus a need for a deeper understanding of how communication might be used to address these challenges. The aim of this handbook is to provide a comprehensive look at public sector communication. It describes and analyzes the contexts, policies, aims, issues, questions, and practices that shape public sector communication in order to understand the complex communication environment as well as the changing citizen and stakeholder expectations that public sector organizations are facing today. These chapters provide a comprehensive overview of current public sector communication research.

The structure of this introductory chapter is as follows. We first consider the relevance of the topic, discussing the specificities, relative to the conditions found in the private and third sectors, of the public sector as a subject of communication. We then introduce the issue of publicness in order to clarify and define public sector communication. Next, we position contributions from different research areas and disciplines to describe what we know so far about the topic. And finally, we explore the various changes that are affecting contexts and citizens, as well as how these shape public sector communication today, and present the structure of this handbook.

# Why Is Public Sector Communication Special?

Public sector organizations are also known as public authority organizations. Authority can be characterized as legitimated power, and public sector organizations require public consent in democratic settings (or coercion in totalitarian regimes) to operate. Public sector organizations operate on several levels—national, regional, and municipal—and they have both politically elected and appointed officials and volunteers as public servants. Public sector organizations often provide public services funded by taxes or other forms of public funding.

What makes public sector organizations' communication special? Though there is much discussion of how the public sector is becoming more and more businesslike with its increased competition and satisfaction measures, there remain eight distinct traits of public sector communication:

1 The environment within which public sector organizations communicate is political, which affects resources, timing, personnel, and goals (Liu & Horsley, 2007).
2 As there is more public pressure for transparency, public sector organizations often have a symbiotic relationship with the media (Fredriksson, Schillemans, & Pallas, 2015), in which organizational actions and decisions are combined with negative media coverage (Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, 2010), narrowing the options for actions.
3 Public sector structures are more complex, diverse, and uncertain in terms of objectives and decision-making criteria (Bjornholt & Houlberg Salomonsen, 2015; Canel & Luoma-aho, 2015; Canel & Sanders, 2012). Moreover, the public sector is less open to market competition than the private sector is, and it has fewer incentives to reduce costs and exhibits less concern about consumer preferences (Thijs & Staes, 2008).
4 Public sector organizations are more constrained by legal and regulatory frameworks than corporations are; they are subject to a greater level of public scrutiny and are required to have a high degree of accountability to their constituencies. Public sector organizations cannot choose whom they serve, and nor can they tailor their services to meet the needs of their favored customers (Luoma-aho, 2008).
5 As their legitimacy depends on citizen approval, public sector organizations understand the important role of listening to citizens and how their success in listening can affect this legitimacy (Macnamara, 2016).
6 The diversity and multiplicity of publics and stakeholders exceed that of corporations (Sanders & Canel, 2013; Wæraas & Maor, 2015).
7 As the services that public sector organizations provide are mostly intangible, measuring their success and the impact of their final products is particularly challenging (Cinca, Molinero, & Queiroz, 2003).
8 The speed at which decision-making occurs is slower for public sector organizations than it is for businesses.

This difference is due to public procedures and bureaucracy, as public sector organizations often have limited budgets that are influenced by multiple stakeholders. Public sector organizations have to operate under a variety of constraints and are required to balance political guidelines, national guidelines, international cooperation, ideologies management, the bureaucratic culture of administration, and ongoing citizen and customer feedback.

Communication has always been important, but public sector organizations have only begun to hire communication professionals in recent decades. These professionals operate in a dynamic and unpredictable environment, and they must combine organizational responsibilities with emerging citizen and employee needs: "As the end-users represent a wide variety of individual needs and expectations, public sector organizations are often specialized into regions or areas of expertise, and must balance multiple goals" (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2016, p. 598). Their vast

responsibilities cover diverse fields, such as infrastructure, livelihood, transportation, education, and health care. Priorities are constantly renegotiated in public sector communication, as unexpected issues may lead to the emergence of new and unexpected stakeholder groups (Luoma-aho & Paloviita, 2010).

It is possible to argue that public opinion and citizens' views are more important for public sector organizations than they are for corporations, as they serve as distributors of democracy in practice. Despite the complex operating environment, almost all citizens have an opinion about public sector organizations or their reputation. These opinions are formed through the interplay of public organizations' communication, achievements, expectations, and trust, and they are shaped by both the media and the cultural settings in which they emerge (James & Moseley, 2014; Liu et al., 2010). Moreover, although citizens may be able to assess services that they receive directly (Laing, 2003), several types of public services that produce social benefits require an understanding of complex interactions as well as professional knowledge, such as that held by analysts. Direct contact with public services and products helps citizens to evaluate these entities, but intangible products or services remain extremely challenging to understand (Van Der Hart, 1991).

# Defining Public Sector Communication

In order to understand the topic of this handbook, we first need to explore the meaning of "public" and examine how various scholarly definitions of "communication" help to delineate the meaning of the "public sector communication" binomial.

## Degrees of Publicness: The Publicness Fan and Its Implications for Public Sector Communication

As the environment around public sector organizations changes, one may question what counts as public within today's hybrid forms of organization and collaboration. If services are outsourced, or if organizations are more project based and funding is only temporary, who is ultimately responsible for their success? And what exactly defines whether an organization is actually considered public?

Elsewhere, we have discussed the issue of publicness (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019), reviewing scholarly contributions from political science and public administration studies about what has been called the "public puzzle" (Antonsen & Jørgensen, 1997; Bozeman & Bretschneider, 1994). The focus of the debate is the blurring boundaries between the private and public sectors, a process that further accelerated owing to the global economic and financial crisis, through which patterns of publicness have changed in unanticipated ways (Meier & O'Toole, 2011, p. 284). Publicness is relevant to the extent that differentiating the public from the private helps to establish criteria with which to conceptualize communication, as well as with which to compare and analyze its practice.

The most commonly accepted criteria to define publicness include ownership (private firms are owned by shareholders, whereas public agencies are owned collectively by the state), sources of financial resources (public agencies are funded by taxation rather than by fees paid directly by customers), and control (political forces versus market forces) (Andrews, Boyne, & Walker, 2011; Rainey, 2011; Walker, Brewer, Boyne, & Avellaneda, 2011). Scholars have introduced the "public purpose" criteria to measure the degree to which organizations adhere to public sector values (democratic accountability, production of collective goods, compliance with due process, and so forth), and in doing so they have highlighted not only the tasks performed but the values that organizations feel obligated to uphold. Thus "publicness" is indicative of a process of public values as inputs, which results in public values as outcomes (Antonsen & Jørgensen, 1997; Bozeman & Moulton, 2011; Meier & O'Toole, 2011).
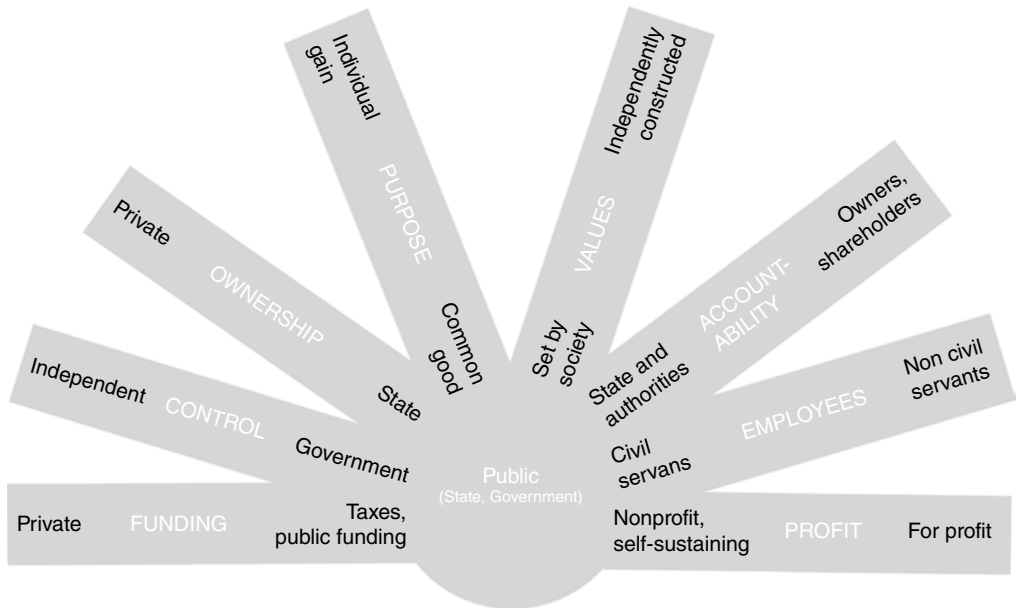
**Figure I.1** The publicness fan (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 29) showing the continuums of what is considered public.

We have illustrated the publicness of public sector organizations through the image of a fan (see Figure I.1), which shows a continuum of various degrees of publicness that are subject to change during the lifespan and evolution of a given public sector organization. The fan structure implies that actors involved in a specific communication situation or action can have different degrees of publicness. The center of the fan represents the "purely public" organizations, such as states or governments. The degree of publicness diminishes toward the outskirts of the fan. We suggest that publicness consists of several variables: funding, control, ownership, purpose, values, accountability, employees, and profit. We are aware that there is some overlap between these variables: for instance, "employees" (whether civil servants or otherwise) could arguably be considered a feature of "ownership"; "profit" (nonprofit versus for profit) is related to "funding"; and "accountability" relates to the "control" that an organization is subject to. The publicness fan separates these variables in order to give this tool the most analytical power possible. Finally, the variable "purpose" measures how oriented an organization or service is to the common good as opposed to individual gain. "Values" measures to what extent the values that guide an organization are set by society as opposed to their being independently constructed.

This fan is a tool that facilitates investigation of the way in which communication is conceptualized and practiced in organizations, and it provides assistance in establishing cross-sector research questions and hypotheses to explore whether publicness makes a difference. For instance, following Walker and Bozeman's approach to cross-sector comparative analysis (Walker et al., 2011, pp. 1–2), specific research questions about communication could include the following:

- What are the specific constraints (in terms of strategies, structures, processes, and values) that affect the public sector's communication management?
- How do these compare with the private sector's communication management?
- Are achievements in terms of communication performance affected by these management differences?
- What problems, challenges, and opportunities do these comparisons highlight?

An organization's degree of publicness influences its communication. For instance, Gelders, Bouckaert, and Van Ruler argue that the greater the level of public funding that is available, the more uncertain public policies are, and in turn, the less certain the schedule for dissemination of public information becomes (Gelders, Bouckaert, & Van Ruler, 2007). Moreover, the more government control is exercised over an organization, the greater the extent to which effective communication is needed in order to overcome stakeholders' negative judgments (Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012, pp. 186–187), the more public the organization's ownership is, and the shorter term the basis for positioning the organization's brand promise becomes (Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). In terms of personnel, the larger the proportion of permanent civil servants among its employees is, the more rigid the legal framework in which the organization operates will be (Gelders et al., 2007). Finally, in the case of more public organizations, more specific criteria are set for recruitment, training, and promotion, as well as for the formulation of the values and principles that should prevail in government communication (Sanders & Canel, 2013).

An organization's degree of publicness is related to its degree of accountability, and this relationship has implications on communication. On the one hand, when organizations are more public, they are more accountable owing to stringent transparency demands (Sanders & Canel, 2013), a phenomenon that most democratic countries are experiencing through the development of transparency and freedom of information laws. These experiences may foster public sector communicators to look for new and innovative ways of establishing relations with citizens. On the other hand, and precisely because of these laws, organizations might become too rigid and thus less creative in their communication (Gelders et al., 2007; Graber, 2003; Liu et al., 2010). This ongoing accountability is also present in the media, and it constrains communication strategies—for example, the timing and content of messages and the information released (Gelders et al., 2007). Negative media coverage might block governmental programs in practice, and in seeking positive news, public sector communicators run the risk of making their messages too technical or emotionless (Fredriksson et al., 2015). Continuous public scrutiny can weaken the success of communication strategies (Vos & Schoemaker, 2006) and increase cynicism, regardless of how honest governmental messages might be in practice (Liu & Horsley, 2007). This scrutiny can also engender suspicions about governments' intentions when they professionalize their communication (Sanders & Canel, 2013). Finally, the more an organization serves the common good, the more it has to deal with complex, multifaceted, and conflicting goals. Multipurpose organizations often have multiple publics, each of which places demands and constraints on managers (Gelders et al., 2007; Luoma-aho, 2008).

In sum, the degree of publicness implies different specificities, constraints, and challenges for communication. These include:

- Segmentation of messages according to different publics (Carpenter & Krause, 2012);
- Implementation of internal communication programs with changing authorities (Canel, 2007; Garnett, 1992; Sanders & Canel, 2013) and organizational culture programs (Gelders et al., 2007; Liu et al., 2010);
- The building of intangible assets such as reputation (Wæraas & Sataøen, 2015), brand, institutional social responsibility, and social capital;
- Identification of the best formulae, methods, and techniques for measuring these intangible assets' effects (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2015).

This handbook is concerned with these challenges, but before we examine the current contexts in which they should be addressed and how different research fields contribute to the study of them, we will provide a definition of public sector communication.

## In Search of a Definition

The first in its field, this handbook of public sector communication builds on previous work from organizational and administration studies, political communication, public relations, and organizational communication. Table I.1 summarizes the definitions of public sector communication from various fields. From these definitions, we can ask some critical questions.

All of the definitions begin by asking who the subjects involved in public sector communication are. Most definitions mention only governments or public sector authorities and organizations, and they exclude other types of actors. Although public sector communication traditionally relates to governments and public agencies, today its scope also encompasses nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and companies that work together to cocreate public services—for example, through outsourcing. The subjects of public sector communication thus include not only governments, public foundations, agencies, authorities, and regulators but also any organizations involved in public–private joint operations, such as state monopolies and businesses. What they all have in common is their service to citizens, whether directly or indirectly (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019).

A second question is how communication is understood. Traditionally, communication is either seen as a management process or as the dissemination of information. These definitions are currently giving way to a more citizen-oriented view, in which communication is seen as a vital process of building intangible assets for the public good (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019). Although citizens' engagement with the public sector is central for public sector organizations, it is merely one part of citizens' networks of societal relationships (Lay-Hwa Bowden, Luoma-aho, & Naumann, 2016), and it should be approached as a more holistic structure through individual experiences instead of organizational control (Bourgon, 2009).

What kind of impact does communication have on public sector management? In the previous definitions, communication is often understood as a management tool for successfully executing organizational functions. However, we suggest that communication plays a larger role; communication is about leadership and influence. It shapes and enables public sector management through intangible assets and cocreation (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2015).

What is the rationale behind public sector communication? Many previous definitions explicitly or implicitly highlight a political rationale, which includes political purposes. We acknowledge that public sector communication's scope extends beyond the political sphere, and it has an entwined political/public dimension. We propose that public sector communication includes both a political rationale and a policy one.

Another question is what public sector communication's relationship with the media is. Most of the existing definitions do not mention media use (Garnett & Kouzmin, 1997), and those that do refer to the categories of "legacy media" and "mass media." Today, the mass media is not a monolithic entity; myriad media forms can be used to reach citizens. These outlets range from paid media formats to owned, earned, searched, shared, mined, borrowed, and even hacked ones.

What is the direction of communication in the public sector? In our view, one-way communication has been associated with an organizational gain in the definition of "political public relations" (Froehlich & Rüdiger, 2006) and of "government news management" (Pfetsch, 2008, p. 90). Interestingly, these definitions come from the political communication research field and highlight the purpose of influencing public opinion for organizational benefit (e.g., to gain or maintain political power). References to two-way communication are rare (Canel, 2007; Lee, 2007). One such reference appears in Garnett's definition of "administrative communication," which explicitly includes both one-way and two-way communication (Garnett & Kouzmin, 1997).

What are the goals of public sector communication? Allusion to the purpose of communication is found in the most thorough definitions of public sector communication, and they reflect

**Table I.1** Definitions of Public Sector Communication and Related Terms.

| Source | Term | Definition | Subjects | Process | Impact on Public Sector Management | Rationale | Media Use | Directionality of Communication | Goals and Purpose of Communication |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Graber 1992, 2003 | Public sector communication | The use of symbols in public organizations to coordinate work in order to achieve goals (elaborated from Graber's texts) | Only and purely public organizations | | To coordinate work | Apolitical | | | To achieve organizational goals |
| Garnett (1997) | Administrative communication | The communication taken by public organizations, which can be one-way or two-way, intentional or unintentional, and can be functional or dysfunctional in impact in the management process (elaborated from Garnett's text) | Only and purely public organizations | Intentionally or unintentionally | Can be functional or dysfunctional for the management process | | | Can be one-way or two-way | |
| Pfetsch (2008), p. 90 | Government news management | A strategic variant of public information whereby governments manage communication in order to influence public opinion by controlling the news media agenda | Governments | Strategic variant of public information | | | News media | Unidirectional | To influence public opinion |
| Froehlich and Rudiger (2006) | Political public relations | The use of media outlets to communicate specific political interpretations of issues in the hope of garnering public support for political purposes | | | | Political | Media outlets | Unidirectional | To gain public support for political purposes |

(*Continued*)

**Table I.1** (Continued)

| Source | Term | Definition | Subjects | Process | Impact on Public Sector Management | Rationale | Media Use | Directionality of Communication | Goals and Purpose of Communication |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Canel (2007) | Public institutions communication | Transactional process of symbols exchange between public institutions and their stakeholders | Only and purely public organizations | Transactional process of symbols exchange | | Political and policy | | Two-way (transactional) | |
| Glenny (2008) | Communication in the public sector | Apolitical or nonpartisan communication activities of the executive arm of government (distinguished from the communication activities that serve the purpose of promoting a political party and/or politician in order to win electoral support) | Executive arm of government | | | Only apolitical and non partisan | | | |
| Lee (2007), p. 6 | Government public relations | Managing different kinds of communication relationships with different kinds of publics | Governments and different kinds of publics | Communication relationships | Acts | | | Two-way (relationships) | |
| Strömbäck and Kiousis (2011), p. 8 | Political public relations | The management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals | Organization or individual actor | Management process, purposeful, | Helps achieving goals | Political | | Two-way (mutuality) | Political purposes to help support its mission and achieve its goals |

| Howlett (2009), p. 24 | Government communication | Policy tool or instrument to give effect to policy goals; to influence and direct policy actions through the provision or withholding of information or knowledge from societal actors | Government | Provision or withholding of information or knowledge | Helps achieving goals and influences policies | Policy | | Unidirectional | To gain public support for policy actions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Canel and Sanders (2013); Sanders and Canel (2014) | Government communication | Communication directed and seeking to influence key publics, in the pursuit of both political and civic purposes, carried out by executive politicians and officials, usually in a managed way, to establish and maintain beneficial relationships to build reputation, to gain support from and interact with citizens, using the tools and strategies of PR and corporate communication | Executive politicians and officials and key publics | Management | | Political and policy | Using the tools and strategies of public relations and corporate communication | Both unidirectional and two-way | Political and civic purposes, beneficial relationships to build reputation, to gain support |

the evolution of communication that has taken place in tandem with the rise of a more multidisciplinary understanding. Thus, Strömbäck and Kiousis's definition of "political public relations" introduces the idea of two-way relationships, which involve establishing, building, and maintaining beneficial relationships. These relations also include the building of intangible assets. These relationships provide a vital benefit to the organization, as they "help support its mission and achieve its goals" (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011, p. 8). This idea of mutual benefit is perhaps best captured in Canel and Sanders's definition of "government communication" (Canel & Sanders, 2010; Sanders & Canel, 2013) as:

> Communication directed and seeking to influence key publics, in the pursuit of both political and civic purposes, carried out by executive politicians and officials, usually in a managed way, to establish and maintain beneficial relationships to build reputation, to gain support from and interact with citizens, using the tools and strategies of PR and corporate communication. (Canel & Sanders, 2015)

We argue that the ultimate purpose and goal of public sector communication should be to maintain the public good (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019).

We understand "public sector communication" to be a broader term than "administrative communication," "government public relations," or "government communication." In previous research (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019, p. 33), we proposed public sector communication be defined as follows:

> goal-oriented communication inside organizations and between organizations and their stakeholders that enables public sector functions, within their specific cultural/political settings, with the purpose of building and maintaining the public good and trust between citizens and authorities.

This definition depicts a multipurpose public sector with multiple stakeholders and organizations (including nonstate organizations), and it is open to descriptive, prescriptive, and normative approaches.

## What Is Our Current Understanding of Public Sector Communication?

The earliest sources that we could find regarding public sector communication go back to McCamy's book chapter published in 1939, which focused on external communications (McCamy, 1939). Other early sources use the term "administrative communication" (Dorsey Jr., 1957; Redfield, 1958; Thayer, 1961), but here *administrative* refers to processes of decision-making and is not necessarily confined to political contexts. Highsaw and Bowen provide the first discussion that focuses specifically on public sector communication in their book *Communication in Public Administration*, published in 1965 (Highsaw & Bowen, 1965). In this book, they describe the problems, potentialities, and areas of development for communication in the public sector at the time when they wrote their work.

On the whole, research on public sector communication is still limited. Despite the key role that communication might play in the provision of public services and goods, communication has not yet been thoroughly analyzed, and more research is needed to address the challenges that public sector organizations face in reaching and engaging citizens, as well as in maintaining their trust (Bourgon, 2009; Garnett, Marlowe, & Pandey, 2008; Gelders & Ihlen, 2010; Glenny, 2008; Grunig, 1992; Lay-Hwa Bowden et al., 2016; Lee, 2010; Lee, Fairhurst, & Wesley, 2009; Luoma-aho & Makikangas, 2014; Sanders & Canel, 2013; Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011; Valentini, 2013; Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). In fact, the term "public sector communication" has rarely been used, and there was only one book (Graber & Doris, 1992) that specifically dealt